

# Eric James

The “living hell” that Eric Antuan James endured and overcame is a story so compelling that it would make a gripping movie. But what enthralls Eric’s students and makes him a superhero worthy of the title is what he has done with his experiences, how he has changed himself, and especially how he uses his hard-won wisdom to inspire change in the lives of students nationwide.

Eric connects with kids who must face seemingly insurmountable odds because he was one of them. Like all too many “at-risk” children, Eric was born to young teenage parents, became a gang member, and was told most of his young life that he was doomed to live a meaningless, hellish life. But Eric ultimately changed his life and became a changed man. With encouragement from his grandfather, help from a middle school teacher who saw the boy’s potential, and Eric’s own belief that there has to be more to his life than the hell on earth it had been, Eric changed himself. He became a rap artist promoting an anti-crime message, and newspapers even chronicled the life of the rapper-with-a-message. He joined the Army and received Army Achievement Medals. He acquired two Master’s Degrees and became a Middle School teacher, a principal, and the superintendent of an Arizona community school district. Today, through his “Changed Man Productions,” his C.H.O.I.C.E. Program, his educator workshops, and his rap performances, Eric spreads messages of hope and inspiration as he campaigns against gangs, drugs and youth crime to attentive young audiences around the country.

## EARLY LIFE

Eric James was born in St. Louis, Missouri, to a 13-year-old girl named Sandra Vershell James and a 17-year-old boy named William Melton. His father was in and out of the penitentiary all of Eric’s life. After Eric was born, he and his young mother traveled from house to house, pathetically moving from one abusive relationship to another. After many years of struggling with the fact that she would never be able to experience childhood, Sandra James accepted Christ, re-married, and died at the age of 26, two days after James’s 13th birthday.

“As a child I remember having a burning desire to want to be acknowledged,” recalls Eric, “and thinking it would be impossible to have any life other than the one I was cursed with.” The life that he would ultimately create for himself today was fueled by the hell he experienced growing up. His life is stark proof that even in the worst of times we still have choices. “In my head, I can still hear the echoes of those who believed that I was nothing, a thug, and that I would die as another ‘black statistic’ who blamed all of his misfortunes on everyone else.” The worst thing was that, for a while at least, he believed them – believed that he would die as another “Product of the Environment.” However, with the help of loved ones, and a longing for a better life, Eric became instead what he describes as a “Product of Choice.”

After his mother died, he was adopted by his loving grandparents James T. and Bessie M. Wafer, but this meant moving to the crime-infested community of Walnut Park, in North St. Louis. Here James was given yet another reason to consider his life a “living hell.” He continued to be physically and emotionally battered throughout his young life, feeling alone and isolated most of the time. With the exception of his grandfather, the only male role models he encountered were drug dealers, womanizers, and thugs.

At 18 years of age, Eric was “jumped in” to Chicago’s largest black gang, the Black Gangster Disciples. It was small consolation that Eric was accepted without any of the typical unlawful rituals. It was not too long before he was fully caught up in the gang life. Although Eric has never killed anyone, he was considered one of the top ranking “folks” in the area, participating in a five-year rivalry with Bloods from Plover Street.

## **CHANGE**

One day Eric’s grandfather overheard Eric expressing himself through rap music. His grandfather was amazed that James had found a way to release the pain and misery that had poisoned his heart. Knowing the potential that Eric had, his grandparents seized an opportunity to help him and his brother. They moved the family into a nice suburban neighborhood and his grandfather built a professional recording studio in their basement.

Eventually, Eric would realize that he was in desperate need of a change in his life. With the encouragement of his high school History teacher, who became a pivotal influence in his life, Eric was exposed to a new world, the world of education and knowledge. Driven by his love for music, and with the support of his grandparents and his History teacher, a new door opened for Eric. A door opened to a world of choice that Eric would never have imagined, not even in his wildest dreams.

Eric soon pursued his dream of becoming a rap artist and went on to perform concerts for middle school students across the St. Louis metropolitan area. He used his talents to spread his anti-gang, anti-crime message to at-risk youth in St. Louis. Two prominent newspapers in St. Louis wrote articles chronicling Eric’s life. Eric then went on to serve in the United States Army for three years and was awarded the Army Commendation Medal and two Army Achievement Medals.

## **THE EDUCATOR**

Believing that knowledge is the key to a successful life, Eric became an avid reader. While serving in the Army, Eric earned his Bachelor’s degree. In 2002, he moved to the Phoenix area to pursue other goals he set for himself, and he would earn two Master’s Degrees in education.

Eric became a middle school teacher and placed himself more confidently than ever upon a path to making a difference with his campaign against gangs, drugs, and youth crime. He served as an 8<sup>th</sup> Grade ELL Instructor (2007-2010), Principal/Superintendent of the Casa Blanca Community School District on the Gila River Indian Reservation (2010-2014), and Principal of the Noah Webster School-PIMA.

He was named Arizona’s Distinguished Principal of the Year for 2011-2012, Elementary Division, and he was nominated by the Gila River Indian Community for the Superintendent of the Year for 2012-2013. Throughout the districts in which he has served, he spearheaded initiatives and procured funding for a myriad of education-strengthening services and programs.

## **TODAY**

Eric James speaks around the country to students and educators. He teaches teachers how to work with at-risk youth. He has developed a program he calls C.H.O.I.C.E., which stands for Courage, Habits, Obstacles, Imagination, Character and Evaluation, and uses his rap skills to engage students. The man

who once thought life could only be a “living hell” has evolved. Where he once believed the stagnating message of becoming a product of one’s environment, he has embraced the enlightening and freeing message that life has choice – and with C.H.O.I.C.E. he has changed...and so, he firmly asserts, can all people!

*At times, I do find myself gazing back into my past, and I can feel the pain from the little boy that so desperately wanted to be validated, that wanted to escape from his loneliness, but the feeling doesn’t last long. I now have family and friends that I can turn to when I reach an obstacle that is hard to overcome, or when I feel myself regressing back into those old feelings of hopelessness.*

*No one should ever underestimate the resiliency of the human heart. I had the courage to follow my dreams and I never gave up on myself. I always knew that there was more to life than my dismal experiences in childhood. Motivation, fortitude, and a strong belief in self are absolutely critical when trying to attain your goals. I have made it through some terrible times, and this has strengthened the person I am today. I am glad to say, “I made it.” I am glad to say, I am a “Changed Man.”*

ERIC JAMES